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SUBJECT: FDP Keeps Distance from CDU/CSU at Start of Campaign

Sensitive but unclassified; not for internet distribution.

11. SUMMARY: The FDP outlined its national campaign strategy January 6 for the September 2009 national elections, but did not clearly signal a strong preference for forming a government with the CDU/CSU. While both the CDU/CSU and FDP see each other as preferred partners and the FDP is desperate to return to government after over a decade in the opposition, the party remains wary of committing to a coalition with the CDU/CSU, as it did in the last national election. National leader Guido Westerwelle also laid out his foreign policy views, as the FDP would most likely gain the Foreign Ministry should it enter the government, expressing doubt about the benefits of a missile defense shield in Europe. The FDP argues that the CDU/CSU has raised taxes in the Grand Coalition and that the SPD works with the Left Party at the state level, making it is the only party that has not broken its word to the voters. END SUMMARY.

CDU/CSU-FDP: THE COALITION THAT SHALL NOT BE NAMED

12. On January 6, the national Free Democratic Party (FDP -- Liberals) held its annual Three Kings Day party convention in Stuttgart. Coming in a year of several state elections, a European Parliament election and a national election in September, the convention served as the party's initial forum for presenting its campaign message. National chairman Guido Westerwelle predicted that the FDP would return to the government for the first time since 1998 after the September 27 general election, but remained silent concerning future coalition preferences. Before the 2005 general election, the FDP agreed on a coalition statement with traditional allies -- the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Christian Social Union (CSU) -- but the parties failed to win a combined majority on election day, thereby mooting the statement. While a CDU/CSU-FDP coalition is clearly the FDP's best option to return to government, Westerwelle's statement reveals a tactical decision to avoid binding the party to its larger allies too early in the campaign. Several party members at the convention told Pol Specialist that no coalition statement will be made as long as the CDU/CSU does not come out with a clear coalition preference of its own.

13. On the CDU side, Deputy Chairman Roland Koch has taken the lead on the issue, as he has no role in the federal government and can speak critically of coalition partner the Social Democratic Party (SPD). In a recent interview, he said "the Grand Coalition is exhausted... The CDU and the SPD are antagonists, not partners." (Note: Koch also faces reelection as Hesse Minister President on January 18 and has said he will only govern with the FDP in the state. End Note.) CSU chairman Horst Seehofer initially argued for more caution suggesting that the parties overplayed their hand in 2005 with the coalition agreement, but reversed his position following the FDP convention and now recommends a CDU/CSU-FDP coalition statement. Other voices in the CDU have suggested pursuing a coalition statement again in order to make the party's position clear to the voters and it may be only a matter of time until the CDU reaches out more formally to the FDP. The most recent national polls put the CDU/CSU at 37% and the FDP at 12%, meaning that a combined majority is in reach, but not guaranteed.

¶4. Westerwelle differentiated the FDP from other parties, attacking the CDU/CSU for failures in its governing Grand Coalition with the SPD. He argued that the Grand Coalition failed to prepare in good economic times for the current hard times and raised taxes, which the CDU/CSU had promised not to do. He also highlighted improving education, ensuring data protection and lowering taxes for medium and small income families as core issues for the FDP. CDU/CSU plans for a post election tax cut remain vague especially in light of the ballooning deficit caused by the economic crisis. The CDU/CSU clearly pursues a different policy from the FDP on data protection, i.e. one that is less protective of the individual than that of the FDP.

¶5. The FDP saved its harshest criticism for the SPD, making it clear that it would be much more difficult for the FDP to enter a SPD-led government. General Secretary Dirk Niebel attacked the SPD and the Green Party for entertaining cooperation with the Left Party at the state level (most notably in Hesse) saying "We did not fight for German unification to bring communists and socialists back into power with a red-red-green (SPD-Left-Greens) coalition." Like Westerwelle, Niebel emphasized the importance of bringing the FDP back into power to prevent a drift to the left in German politics. The party has adopted the slogan "Our word is good" suggesting that all other parties have gone back on promises to the voters.

¶6. Westerwelle also addressed foreign policy issues, since the party would most likely gain the Foreign Ministry if it entered the government and Westerwelle would be the most likely candidate for minister. (Note: the junior coalition partner traditionally takes

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the Foreign Ministry in Germany. End Note.) He advocated a policy focusing on disarmament (a traditional FDP cause), and stressed political over military solutions to global problems. He expressed doubts about plans to build a missile defense shield in Poland and the Czech Republic saying the system would divide Europe and unleash a new arms race.

¶7. Comment: Having spent over ten years in opposition, the FDP is desperate to return to government and otherwise may face growing irrelevance in the political spectrum. Westerwelle's own political star would diminish as well, although he has achieved some wins for the party at the state level since becoming chairman in 2001 and has few rivals in the party. The party has so far proceeded with caution, avoiding the perceived mistakes of 2005, and leaving itself the option of conducting an independent campaign, critical of all parties. Despite this tactical move, the party clearly sees a coalition with the CDU/CSU as its best bet to return to power. End Comment.

¶8. This cable was coordinated with Embassy Berlin.
POWELL